# 7 STEPS TO EFFECTIVE MEDIA COMMUNICATION DURING PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCIES

STEP 1: Assess media needs, media constraints, and internal media-relations capabilities

- 1.1: Assess the needs of the media
- **1.2:** Assess the constraints of the media
- **1.3:** Assess internal media-relations capabilities

STEP 2: Develop goals, plans and strategies

- **2.1:** *Develop* media communication goals and objectives
- **2.2:** *Develop* a written media communication plan
- **2.3:** *Develop* a partner and stakeholder strategy

**STEP 3: Train communicators** 

- **3.1:** *Train* the media communication team
- **3.2:** *Train* a public information officer
- **3.3:** *Train* a designated lead spokesperson

**STEP 4: Prepare messages** 

- **4.1:** *Prepare* lists of stakeholders and their concerns
- 4.2: Prepare clear and concise messages
- **4.3:** *Prepare* targeted messages

STEP 5: Identify media outlets and media activities

- **5.1:** *Identify* available media outlets
- **5.2:** *Identify* the most effective media outlets
- **5.3:** *Identify* media activities for the first 24–72 hours

**STEP 6: Deliver messages** 

- **6.1:** *Deliver* clear and timely messages
- **6.2:** *Deliver* messages to maintain visibility
- **6.3:** *Deliver* targeted messages

**STEP 7: Evaluate messages and performance** 

- **7.1:** *Evaluate* message delivery and media coverage
- **7.2:** *Evaluate* and improve performance based on feedback
- 7.3: Evaluate public responses to messages

#### Taken from:

Effective Media Communication during Public Health Emergencies: A WHO Handbook. Hyer RN and Covello VT. Geneva, World Health Organization (WHO/CDS/2005.31) 2005; July.

# When talking with the media, questions often asked include:

- Who is affected?
- Who is at fault?
- Who is responsible?
- What has happened?
- What is the cost?
- Where has it happened?
- What is being done?
- When did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- Why wasn't it prevented?
- Will it happen again?

See WHO Handbook for a fuller list of 77 frequently asked questions.

# When wanting to return to key points or redirect the communication, examples of "bridging" statements include:

- And what's most important to know is...
- However, what is more important to look at is..."
- However, the real issue here is..."
- And what this all means is..."
- And what's most important to remember is..."
- With this in mind, if we look at the bigger picture..."
- With this in mind, if we take a look back..."
- If we take a broader perspective,..."
- If we look at the big picture..."
- Let me put all this in perspective by saying..."
- What all this information tells me is..."
- Before we continue, let me take a step back and repeat that...
- Before we continue, let me emphasize that..."
- This is an important point because..."
- "What this all boils down to is..."
- "The heart of the matter is..."

See WHO Handbook for a fuller list of 33 bridging statements.



# POINTS TO REMEMBER WHEN PREPARING AND DELIVERING MESSAGES

# When preparing messages

- prepare three key points that communicate your core messages;
- prepare supporting message points;
- develop supporting material such as visuals, examples, quotes, personal stories, analogies, and endorsements by credible third parties;
- keep messages simple and short; and
- practise delivery.

## To communicate voluntariness – prepare messages that:

- make the risk more voluntary by providing options and choices;
- · encourage public dialogue and debate;
- ask permission; and
- ask for informed consent.

## To communicate controllability – prepare messages that:

- identify things for people to do (for example, precautions and preventive actions);
- indicate a willingness to cooperate and share authority and responsibility with others;
- provide important roles and responsibilities for others;
- · tell people how to recognize problems or symptoms; and
- tell people how and where to go to get further information.

#### To communicate familiarity – prepare messages that:

- use analogies to make the unfamiliar familiar;
- encourage experiential learning;
- have high visual content; and
- describe means for exploring issues in greater depth.

## To communicate fairness – prepare messages that:

- acknowledge possible inequities;
- address inequities; and
- discuss options and trade-offs.

#### To communicate trust – prepare messages that:

- cite credible third parties;
- cite credible sources for further information;
- acknowledge that there are other points of view;
- indicate a willingness to be held accountable;
- describe achievements;
- indicate conformity with the highest professional, scientific and ethical standards;
- cite scientific research;
- identify the partners working with you; and
- indicate a willingness to share the risk.

# When delivering messages during an emergency

- recognize and acknowledge anger, frustration, fear, outrage or concern;
- · provide three or more positive points to counter negative information or bad news;
- accept and involve the public and the media as legitimate partners;
- indicate through actions, words and gestures that you share their concerns;
- listen carefully to what people are concerned about;
- convey compassion, conviction and optimism through actions, gestures and words;
- speak clearly, simply and calmly avoid technical terms and long words or phrases;
  and
- gain trust by admitting that there are things you do not know.

# When conducting a news conference or other formal media event:

- make your formal statement as brief as possible;
- include all pertinent information in your statement and allow time for questions;
- limit the number of speakers to no more than three and limit each to 3–5 minutes;
- remember that it is primarily held to allow the media to ask questions, not to attend a lecture; and
- start on time journalists have deadlines and need enough time to file your story.

## When addressing affected populations:

- identify the information they most need to protect themselves;
- · use very clear means and formats to communicate the information to them; and
- use diverse formal and informal channels, such as community meetings, open houses, stand-up presentations where people congregate, radio broadcasts and posters.

#### When communicating through the media during an emergency:

- brief the media promptly following an incident;
- fill information vacuums;
- state, if appropriate, that the information is preliminary;
- state that the media will be updated as additional information becomes available;
- state what is factual and known avoid speculating on the unknown;
- hold regular briefings (for example, every 2 hours) even if nothing has changed;
- state when you expect new information to become available;
- provide dedicated hotlines and telephone information services for all important stakeholders;
- provide a media communications centre that is staffed 24 hours a day;
- plan how often information updates will be provided, who will do it, and how; and
- use news conferences, briefings and one-on-one interviews.